

Ready for a change

When the familiar voice of Greg Barron went off the air at KSJN early last January, many public radio listeners assumed they would soon hear it again, coming perhaps from National Public Radio headquarters in Washington. There was, after all, every reason to assume that if Barron had moved out at Minnesota Public Radio, he would certainly have done so in order to move up. In eight and a half years at the regional radio network the senior producer from MPR had become probably the best-known reporter/producer in radio journalism in Minnesota, and had picked up numerous awards for excellence along the way, including two Peabody Awards and the Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Award.

There was also the somewhat curious and sudden nature of his departure, which followed an argument with MPR president Bill Kling over the fact that somebody had taken Barron's parking place one day. Barron maintained that he had been ready to leave for some time and that the disagreement merely hastened the decision. As it turned out, Barron wasn't kidding. Despite numerous offers in both radio and television, Barron is out of journalism altogether. On April 6 he joined the recently opened Minneapolis office of Hill and Knowlton, the world's largest public relations firm. Barron will work there as an account executive specializing in broadcast services.

"I guess that basically I had finally just run out of room at Minnesota Public Radio," Barron says. "There didn't seem to be anything new left to do. I suppose I could have moved to National Public Radio, but one of the things I had realized was that Minnesota was now my home, pure and simple. I didn't want to go anywhere else. Doing commercial radio here would have meant going back into daily journalism and on much more limited resources. It didn't really seem like an alternative. Going into television would have involved the challenge of learning a new technique, but it wouldn't have been enough change.

"It was great to be in radio and I was lucky enough to be in a niche where recognition for your work comes fairly easily. But I was ready for a real change. One of the things I was interested in was learning something about business."

Barron will oversee two areas of communications PR for Hill and Knowlton. One will be their exclusive time-lease arrangement with both the Associated Press and United Press International audio services. Hill and Knowlton is the only public relations firm with such an arrangement. The firm produces 60- and 90-second radio features for its clients. Generally they are industry stories, new



Photo by Phil Frowse

Greg Barron: "instant rapport."

product announcements and the like in which the client serves as a primary source in the story. The stories are transmitted to 1,600 radio stations around the country.

Barron's other main area of responsibility will be to develop a program for training executives in effective communications. The idea is to provide speaker training for CEOs and other senior executives and also to educate them in dealing with the press. Barron is particularly excited about teaching executives about reporters and what they do.

"There is a very general problem most business people have in dealing with the press," Barron says. "They don't know the rules of an interview. Ultimately, any relationship with a reporter comes down to a matter of trust. But it's very important to understand how to come to terms with a reporter before sitting down in an interview. You have to learn how to establish an agreement on how you're going to proceed. Executives have to realize that they can't just charge into a

conversation with a reporter and then suddenly say things like, 'Oh, by the way. That's off the record.'

"I'm viewing the program we're putting together here as a real opportunity to let our clients know what they can expect from the media and what they have to gain in being open with the press. There is a real opportunity missed when a businessman is reluctant to engage a reporter."

Barron is certainly well qualified to develop such a program, and he is plainly excited about his new job. He said he found an almost "instant rapport" with the people at Hill and Knowlton.

"Sometimes journalists are guilty of thinking they have answered a higher calling," Barron says. "In a way, they seem to work on an assumption that public relations is not as important or valid as what they do. I don't think that is the right way to look at it. Public relations is *different* from journalism, that's all. What I'm finding out so far is that the people in this business are as talented and professional as you'll find anywhere."